

## Subjunctive Biscuit and Stand-Off Conditionals

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**Abstract** Conventional wisdom has it that many intriguing features of indicative conditionals aren't shared by subjunctive conditionals. Subjunctive morphology is common in discussions of wishes and wants, however, and conditionals are commonly used in such discussions as well. As a result such discussions are a good place to look for subjunctive conditionals that exhibit features usually associated with indicatives alone. Here I offer subjunctive versions of J. L. Austin's 'biscuit' conditionals—e.g., “There are biscuits on the sideboard if you want them”—and subjunctive versions of Allan Gibbard's 'stand-off' or 'Sly Pete' conditionals, in which speakers with no relevant false beliefs can in the same context felicitously assert conditionals with the same antecedents and contradictory consequents. My cases undercut views according to which the indicative/subjunctive divide marks a great difference in the meaning of conditionals. They also make trouble for treatments of indicative conditionals that cannot readily be generalized to subjunctives.

**Keywords** Conditionals · Subjunctive conditionals · Counterfactuals · Biscuit conditionals · Stand-off conditionals

Conventional wisdom has it that many intriguing features of indicative conditionals aren't shared by subjunctive conditionals. Subjunctive morphology is common in discussions of wishes and wants, however,<sup>1</sup> and conditionals are commonly used in such discussions as well. As a result such discussions are a good place to look for subjunctive conditionals that exhibit features usually associated with indicatives alone. Here I offer subjunctive versions of J. L. Austin's 'biscuit' (or 'relevance') conditionals (1956, 158), and subjunctive versions of Allan Gibbard's 'stand-off' or 'Sly Pete' conditionals (1981, 231–232). My cases undercut views according to which the indicative/subjunctive divide marks a great difference in the meaning of conditionals. They also make trouble for treatments of indicative conditionals that cannot readily be generalized to subjunctives.

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<sup>1</sup>For extensive discussion, see IATRIDOU 2000.

## 1. Subjunctive biscuit conditionals

The ample literature on biscuit conditionals assumes (and sometimes asserts) that all biscuit conditionals are indicative. For example, Renaat Declerck and Susan Reed write that biscuit conditionals “...cannot appear in the form of pattern 2 [‘If she came I would tell her everything’] or pattern 3 [‘If she had come I would have told her everything’]” conditionals (2001, 324).<sup>2</sup> But the underlined conditionals in (1) and (2) ought to count as biscuit conditionals:

- (1) I want to vacation in a posh hotel in London. We would have tea every afternoon, and there would be biscuits on the sideboard, if one were so inclined.
- (2) I wish we had decided to vacation in a posh hotel in London. We would have had tea every afternoon, and there would have been biscuits on the sideboard, if one had been so inclined.

Both of the conditionals in (1) and (2) resemble more familiar biscuit conditionals in failing to exhibit the features of “genuine conditionality” (GEIS & LYCAN 1993, 36–37). Most tellingly, (1) conveys that there would be biscuits on the sideboard whether or not one were so inclined, and (2) conveys there would have been biscuits on the sideboard whether or not one had been so inclined. A speaker could use such conditionals to avoid flatly asserting that there would be (or would have been) biscuits on the sideboard, if the speaker does not want to presuppose that the addressee cares whether there would be (or would have been) biscuits on the sideboard. This exactly parallels Austin’s original example: (3) conveys that there are biscuits on the sideboard whether or not the addressee wants them, and allows the speaker to convey this without avoid presupposing that the addressee wants biscuits.

- (3) There are biscuits on the sideboard if you want them.

Just as “it would be folly to ... understand the meaning of [(3)] to be that you have only to want biscuits to cause them to be on the sideboard” (AUSTIN 1956, 158), it would be folly to understand the meaning of (1) to be that on a vacation in a posh hotel in London you would have only to be so inclined for biscuits to appear. Similarly for (2).

Here are two hybrids—biscuit conditionals with indicative antecedents and subjunctive consequents.

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<sup>2</sup>See also IATRIDOU 1991, 52–58; GEIS & LYCAN 1993; DANCYGIER & SWEETSER 1997, 121 and 2005, chapter 5; DEROSE & GRANDY 1999; LYCAN 2001, 206–210; SIEGEL 2006; FRANKE 2007; SCHEFFLER 2008a; and PREDELLI 2009.

- (4) I want to vacation in a posh hotel in London. We would have tea every afternoon, and there would be biscuits on the sideboard, if you're into that sort of thing.
- (5) I wish we had decided to vacation in a posh hotel in London. We would have had tea every afternoon, and there would have been biscuits on the sideboard, if you're into that sort of thing.

Like (1), (2), and (3), the conditionals in (4) and (5) do not suggest that the presence of biscuits on the sideboard is in any way conditional on whether or not the addressee would care to indulge. But there is one subtle difference between these examples and those in (1) and (2), respectively: even a person who isn't "into that sort of thing" might allow that she could find herself caught up in the moment (and desiring biscuits) were she to vacation in a posh hotel in London. So (4) and (5) target the addressee's present attitude toward biscuits more directly than (1) and (2) do.

Although the syntactic forms of the conditionals in (1), (2), (4), and (5) are importantly different from those of their indicative counterparts, subjunctive biscuit conditionals pass an impressive range of syntactic tests ordinarily associated with indicative biscuit conditionals. This suggests that even in their syntax indicative and subjunctive biscuit conditionals form a relatively unified class. Sabine Iatridou influentially discusses several syntactic features of indicative biscuit conditionals in her 1991.<sup>3</sup> I'll focus on three of those features here: the obligatory absence of conditional 'then' in certain biscuit conditionals; binding data that suggest that the consequents of biscuit conditionals cannot c-command their antecedents; and the inability of the antecedents of biscuit conditionals to serve as the first constituent in certain Verb Second languages.

First, adding conditional 'then' changes the meanings of (1) and (2) to meanings on which the consequent's truth somehow depends on the truth of the antecedent:

- (6) I want to vacation in a posh hotel in London. We would have tea every afternoon, and if one were so inclined then there would be biscuits on the sideboard.
- (7) I wish we had decided to vacation in a posh hotel in London. We would have had tea every afternoon, and if one had been so inclined then there would have been biscuits on the sideboard.

This is a classic indication of a biscuit conditional (DAVISON 1979, 416–417). As Iatridou puts it, (8) "could be interpreted as saying that your being thirsty will cause the appearance of a beer in the fridge, and with this interpretation *then* can appear"

<sup>3</sup>See also IATRIDOU 1994 and BHATT & PANCHEVA 2006.

(1994, 182).

(8) If you're thirsty, (# then) there is a beer in the fridge.

But the addition of 'then' here precludes a biscuit reading, leaving available only a 'magical connection' reading of (8)—the same kind of reading that is obligatory for (6) and (7).

Second, on the basis of the contrast between (9) and the biscuit conditional (10), and the contrast between (11) and the biscuit conditional (12), Iatridou argues that "an anaphor or a reciprocal inside [a hypothetical conditional's antecedent] can be bound by the matrix subject" but that the matrix subject cannot bind into a biscuit conditional's antecedent (1991, 56–57).<sup>4</sup>

(9) Mary and Bill will become rich if stories about themselves are published.

(10) \*Mary and Bill will know where to find me if stories about themselves are told.

(11) Mary and Bill will become rich if each other's photographs are published.

(12) \*Mary and Bill will know where to find me if each other's friends want to talk to me.

There are similar contrasts between (13) and the subjunctive biscuit conditional (14):

(13) Mary and Bill would have become rich if stories about themselves had been published.

(14) \*Mary and Bill would have known where to find me if stories about themselves had been told.

And again between (15) and the subjunctive biscuit conditional (16):

(15) Mary and Bill would have become rich if each other's photographs had been published.

(16) \*Mary and Bill would have known where to find me if each other's friends had been so inclined.

Subjunctive biscuit conditionals are unusual enough that it's important to control for other reasons why (14) and (16) might sound bad. But (17) and (18) are fine.

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<sup>4</sup>Judgments about Iatridou's original examples (and about my examples) are mixed; some informants find (9), (11), (13), and (15) marginal at best. Many of these informants nevertheless see contrasts between the elements of the relevant pairs. Whether or not such contrasts on their own are sufficient for all of Iatridou's purposes, they may be helpful diagnostics for biscuit conditionals. Informants who find no contrast between these pairs, of course, simply need to fall back on other diagnostics. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for *Philosophical Studies* for discussion.)

- (17) Mary and Bill would have known where to find me if stories about them had been told.
- (18) Mary and Bill would have known where to find me if they had been so inclined.

So here again, indicative and subjunctive biscuit conditionals pattern together.

Third, indicative and subjunctive biscuit conditionals pattern together in certain ‘Verb Second’ languages—roughly, languages in which the verb must be the second constituent of a finite clause.<sup>5</sup> In Dutch and German, for example, the antecedents of ordinary indicative conditionals generally serve as the first constituent, forcing the subject to follow the matrix verb. Klaus-Michael Köpcke and Klaus-Uwe Panther give the following minimal pair for German (1989, 687):

- (19) Wenn Werder Bremen verliert, wird Bayern München Meister.  
 If Werder Bremen loses becomes Bayern München champion.  
 ‘If Werder Bremen is defeated, Bayern München will be the champion.’
- (20) \*Wenn Werder Bremen verliert, Bayern München wird Meister.  
 If Werder Bremen loses Bayern München becomes champion.

But indicative biscuit conditionals generally exhibit “non-integrative” word order. The contrast thus flips (688):

- (21) \*Wenn du es noch nicht wußtest, ist Hans wieder im Lande.  
 If you it yet not knew is Hans again in-the country  
 ‘In case you didn’t know, Hans is back in town.’
- (22) Wenn du es noch nicht wußtest, Hans ist wieder im Lande.  
 If you it yet not knew Hans is again in-the country

The generalizations here are not airtight, as Köpcke and Panther note (699–703). Moreover, different Verb Second languages behave differently (KÖNIG & VAN DER AUWERA 1988, 108–111). And examples of subjunctive biscuit conditionals like those I have given here are at best extremely strained in Dutch.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless German subjunctive biscuit conditionals seem to exhibit some of the distinctive behavior

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<sup>5</sup>English is often classed as a ‘residual’ Verb Second language on the basis of contrasts like

- (i) Under no circumstances [is [John [allowed to continue in his work]]].
- (ii) \*Under no circumstances [John [is [allowed to continue in his work]]].

See especially RIZZI 1991 and 1996, and CULICOVER 1992.

<sup>6</sup>Thanks to Inge Genee, Janneke Huitink, and Robert van Rooij for judgments and helpful discussion.

of their indicative counterparts. For example, the conditionals in the following loose translations of (1) and (2) *must* be read as biscuit conditionals.<sup>7</sup>

(1)' Ich möchte in einem Nobelhotel in London Urlaub machen. Wir würden  
I want in a posh hotel in London holiday to go. We would  
jeden Nachmittag Tee trinken. Wenn uns danach wäre, Kekse wären auf  
every afternoon tea drink. If we for it were, biscuits would be on  
dem Nachttisch.  
the nightstand.

(2)' Ich wünschte wir hätten beschlossen in einem Nobelhotel in London Urlaub  
I wish we had decided in a posh hotel in London holiday  
zu machen. Wir würden jeden Nachmittag Tee getrunken haben. Wenn uns  
to go. We would every afternoon tea have drunk. If we  
danach gewesen wäre, Kekse wären auf dem Nachttisch gewesen.  
for it have been would, biscuits would on the nightstand have been.

So German's way of disambiguating between indicative biscuit and hypothetical conditionals is robust enough to carry over to their subjunctive counterparts.

I think it is clear that the foregoing considerations, taken as a whole, establish that on the traditional ways of categorizing conditionals biscuit conditionals spill over the morphosyntactic line between indicative and subjunctive conditionals.<sup>8</sup> So arguments that appeal to the features of biscuit conditionals spill over the line as well. In one such argument, Keith DeRose and Richard Grandy hold the "conditional assertion" view on familiar indicative biscuit conditionals to "generate[s] significant support for taking indicative conditionals to be devices of conditional assertion" (1999, 415). After all, a theory that treats biscuit conditionals and other conditionals in a unified way is, *ceteris paribus*, a better theory than a theory that gives them a bifurcated treatment. The cases above suggest that to the extent that the phenomena associated with biscuit conditionals motivate a given view on indicative conditionals, they motivate an analogous view on at least some subjunctive conditionals. Extending suppositional views of indicative conditionals to subjunctives is bold and

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<sup>7</sup>Thanks to Kai von Fintel and Franz Huber for translations, judgments, and helpful discussion.

<sup>8</sup>There are some passing discussions of Philip Johnson-Laird's "If you had needed some money, there was some in the bank" (1986, 51) and similar examples in the literature. But I think Johnson-Laird is right to emphasize that in examples like these the antecedents target "alternative histories" while the consequents target "actual states" (70). Declerck and Reed concur, saying that in the conditional "If you had been hungry, there was plenty of food in the fridge," "an imaginary P-clause combines with a factual Q-clause" (324). These conditionals are thus at best "hybrids between subjunctive and indicative" (FRANKE 2009, 270). For other brief discussions of this kind of biscuit conditional, see MCCAWLEY 1996, VON FINTEL 1999, and SCHEFFLER 2008b.

uncommon, but not unprecedented.<sup>9</sup> Those who would resist generalizing views like Edgington's to subjunctive conditionals might well run DeRose and Grandy's unification argument against them, claiming that given certain constraints on our theories of subjunctive conditionals—for example, the constraint that subjunctive conditionals express propositions—the existence of subjunctive biscuit conditionals suggests that we need a less radical analysis of biscuit conditionals in general.

## 2. Subjunctive stand-off conditionals

Suppose that Al, Bert, Carl, Dawn, Eve, and Fran are siblings. It's common ground that their parents are considering taking a trip to London, and that if they go they will bring Al, Bert, Carl, and exactly one of Dawn, Eve, and Fran. From different vantage points, Al and Bert witness a conversation between their parents and at least some of their siblings. From his vantage point, Al sees Dawn, Eve, and Fran walk into the room, sees Fran leave, and hears another sibling leave. He then hears their parents telling either Dawn or Eve (he's not sure which) that they will take her if they go. From his vantage point, Bert sees Dawn, Eve, and Fran walk into the room, hears a sibling leave, and sees Eve leave. He then hears their parents telling either Dawn or Fran (he's not sure which) that they will take her if they go. Later, Al says to Carl:

- (23) I want to go to London. We would see Big Ben, and the Tate Modern. And if Dawn weren't with us, Eve would be, although Fran wouldn't be.

And Bert says to Carl:

- (24) I want to go to London. We would see Big Ben, and the Tate Modern. And if Dawn weren't with us, Fran would be, although Eve wouldn't be.

Al and Bert's subjunctive conditionals constitute a Gibbardian stand-off.<sup>10</sup> Although those conditionals have the same antecedents, they have contradictory consequents, and yet

Neither [Al nor Bert] has any relevant false beliefs, and indeed both may well suspect the whole relevant truth. Neither, then, could sincerely be

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<sup>9</sup>For discussion see SKYRMS 1980a, 1980b, and 1994, and EDGINGTON 1991, 1995, 1997a, and 2008. It is also worth noting that Edgington (1995, 287–288) and Michael Woods (1997, 76–77) appeal to conditional questions that are reminiscent of biscuit conditionals to support conditional speech act analyses, and there are subjunctive conditional questions: see ISAACS & RAWLINS 2008.

<sup>10</sup>This framework for setting up a Gibbardian stand-off—namely, providing a single source of evidence that underwrites very different conditional probabilities when that source of evidence is incompletely but accurately apprehended from different vantage points—is originally due to EDGINGTON 1997b, 107.

asserting anything false. Each is sincere, and so each, if he is asserting a proposition at all, is asserting a true proposition (GIBBARD 1981, 231).

The same case generates Gibbardian stand-offs with subjunctive conditionals about the past. Suppose that a uneventful year passes; no one goes to London. Al says to Carl:

- (25) I wish we had gone to London. We would have seen Big Ben, and the Tate Modern. And if Dawn hadn't been the sister with us, Eve would have been.

And Bert says to Carl:

- (26) I wish we had gone to London. We would have seen Big Ben, and the Tate Modern. And if Dawn hadn't been the sister with us, Fran would have been.

Again, the conditionals that Al and Bert use here have the same antecedents, and contradictory consequents. And yet it seems that neither Al nor Bert has any relevant false beliefs.

Many see the familiar stand-off cases in the literature as a serious challenge for truth-conditional semantics for indicative conditionals. For example, Gibbard argues that “The only apparent way to reconcile [a stand-off] with Conditional Non-contradiction”—i.e., with the validity of “ $a \rightarrow \bar{b}$  is inconsistent with  $a \rightarrow b$ ”—is to hold that the proposition expressed by one speaker uttering a given sentence in the stand-off is different than the proposition that the other speaker would have expressed using exactly the same sentence (231–232). Gibbard sketches a semantics with this consequence, but influentially objects that it involves “radical dependence” of the proposition expressed on the doxastic state of the speaker (234). Angelika Kratzer embraces that kind of context sensitivity as support for her view that an indicative conditional is, in effect, a subjective epistemic modal with the modal base explicitly restricted by the conditional's antecedent. When we have a Gibbardian stand-off, she writes, “indicative conditionals are interpreted with respect to the evidence available to their utterers. But this means that they are implicitly modalized” (1986, 655).

The conditionals in (23)–(26) suggest that stand-off cases for subjunctive conditionals are as serious a challenge for truth-conditional semantics for subjunctive conditionals as familiar stand-off cases are for truth-conditional semantics for indicative conditionals. And to the extent that stand-off cases help motivate a particular truth-conditional account of indicative conditionals, they also help motivate an analogous truth-conditional account of at least some subjunctive conditionals. So if Kratzer is right that Gibbardian stand-offs for indicative conditionals support the hypothesis that some indicative conditionals should be treated as epistemic modals, then Gibbardian stand-offs for subjunctive conditionals support the hypothesis that some

subjunctive conditionals—like (23)–(26)—should be treated as epistemic modals. This hypothesis brings in its wake the “radical dependence” of the proposition expressed on the speaker’s doxastic state, but this time with subjunctive conditionals. Other parameterized analyses, like that of LYCAN 2001, will similarly have to spread “radical dependence” on the speaker’s doxastic state into certain subjunctives.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, to the extent that Gibbardian stand-offs for indicative conditionals support the hypothesis that some indicative conditionals lack truth conditions, or that their truth conditions do not fully characterize their content,<sup>12</sup> it seems that Gibbardian stand-offs for subjunctive conditionals support the hypothesis that some subjunctive conditionals lack truth conditions. Edgington would welcome this conclusion (see especially her 2008), and she too has argued that some subjunctive conditionals exhibit the Gibbard phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> But many advocates of ‘no-truth-value’ theories of indicative conditionals, including Gibbard and Bennett, might well be reluctant to say that some perfectly meaningful subjunctive conditionals lack truth values. And recently WEATHERSON 2006, STEPHENSON 2007, and others have suggested that Gibbardian stand-offs lend support to the view that at least some indicative conditionals demand a “relativist” semantics.<sup>14</sup> If that’s right, then subjunctive Gibbardian stand-offs lend support to the view that at least some subjunctive conditionals demand a relativist semantics.

What I have tried to show in this section is that Gibbardian stand-offs spill over the morphosyntactic line between indicative and subjunctive conditionals, in such a way that arguments that appeal to Gibbardian stand-offs spill over the line as well. For all I have said here there is nevertheless a semantic distinction between (say) “epistemic conditionals” and “nearness conditionals” (GIBBARD 1981, 229). But subjunctive morphology is easy enough to slip into discussions of wishes and wants that it is hard to sustain the view that the indicative/subjunctive distinction in the morphology and syntax of conditionals, as we currently conceive of it, correlates with any such semantic distinction.

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<sup>11</sup>For discussion of other putative reasons to think there are ‘epistemic’ subjunctive conditionals, see KRATZER 1981 and 1989; HANSSON 1989; MORREAU 1992; LINDSTRÖM & RABINOWICZ 1995; ROTT 1999; VELTMAN 2005 (but compare his 1985, 217–218); and SCHULZ 2007. In his 2005 Veltman says he “doubts” that counterfactuals have epistemic readings, but the basis for his doubt is that “only people who have gone through the same epistemic process” as the speaker would be able to “appreciate” such readings (174). Whatever its merits with respect to standard examples, this consideration isn’t relevant to my examples of subjunctive stand-offs.

<sup>12</sup>See, e.g., GIBBARD 1981; STALNAKER 1984; BENNETT 1988 and 2003; EDGINGTON 1991, 1995, and 1997b; and WOODS 1997.

<sup>13</sup>See her 1991, 1995, and 1997b; see also MORTON 1997. My cases do without Edgington’s assumption that “‘If Jones had ... he would have ...’ expresses at a later time what ‘If Jones does ..., he will ...’ expressed at an earlier time” (1997b, 108).

<sup>14</sup>But see Weatherston’s subsequent 2009, 347 for some reservations.

### 3. ‘Counterfactuality’ and subjunctive conditionals

The famous examples (27) and (28) establish that subjunctive conditionals needn’t carry the presupposition that their antecedents are false.<sup>15</sup>

- (27) If Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown just exactly those symptoms which he does in fact show.<sup>16</sup>
- (28) The murderer used an ice-pick. But if the butler had done it, he wouldn’t have used an ice-pick. So the murderer must have been someone else. (STALNAKER 1975, 200; Stalnaker credits the example to John Watling.)

Notice that both (27) and (28) have a strong inferential flavor—indeed, Roderick Chisholm would classify them as subjunctive conditionals in their “deliberative use” (1946, 291; see also IPPOLITO 2003, 177). In particular both seem to involve inference to the best explanation (ADAMS 1975, 145).

But subjunctive conditionals that are not ‘counterfactual’ need not have this kind of inferential flavor. Consider Kai von Fintel’s

- (29) If Polly had come to dinner tonight, we would have had a good time. If Uli had made the same amount of food that he in fact made, she would have eaten most of it. (1999, 39)

My (1), (23), and (24) are further grist for this mill. For example, (1) does not carry the presupposition that one would not be so inclined, on vacationing in a posh hotel in London; and (23) does not carry the presupposition that Dawn would not be in London if the speaker’s wants were satisfied.

- (1) I want to vacation in a posh hotel in London. We would have tea every afternoon, and there would be biscuits on the sideboard, if one were so inclined.
- (23) I want to go to London. We would see Big Ben, and the Tate Modern. And if Dawn weren’t with us, Eve would be, although Fran wouldn’t be.
- (24) I want to go to London. We would see Big Ben, and the Tate Modern. And if Dawn weren’t with us, Fran would be, although Eve wouldn’t be.

None of these examples have the strong inferential flavor of (27) and (28).

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<sup>15</sup>See also KARTTUNEN & PETERS 1979, PALMER 1986, IATRIDOU 2000, and IPPOLITO 2003 and 2006.

<sup>16</sup>This particular example is due to ANDERSON 1951, 37, but see also FIRTH 1943, chapter 7, and CHISHOLM 1946, 291.

#### 4. Conclusion

I hope to have strengthened and broadened the case for thinking that indicative and subjunctive conditionals are more similar to each other than one might have expected. In particular, whether a conditional has indicative or subjunctive morphosyntax is orthogonal both to whether it is a biscuit conditional and to whether it is a stand-off conditional. So we should seek analyses of indicative biscuit and stand-off conditionals that generalize to their subjunctive cousins. And we should not think that a theory of subjunctive conditionals is complete unless it can account for their biscuit and stand-off uses.

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